

A LONG TIME UNTIL MORNING AND OTHERS:
A CREATIVE REPORT

by

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INTRODUCTION

In A Long Time until Morning and Others, a collection of four short stories, the problem of human isolation is dealt with through the character of Charlie Evans. Each of the four stories delineates an aspect of Charlie's inability to communicate with people around him and of his increasing realization that this lack of communication is a problem not unique to his dealings with certain people, such as his father, but is present in all of his relationships with others. As the scope of the problem becomes broader, Charlie increasingly takes refuge in alcohol, and his being in an alcoholic ward in the title story, which ends the collection, is a logical result of his use of liquor as an escape mechanism.

Basically, this is the thematic skeleton of this collection of stories, but there is another theme that works within the framework already described, one that lends a positive note to what might otherwise be a too grimly pessimistic over-all effect. This is the theme of Charlie's progression from an extreme self-centeredness in the first two stories to his concern for others as it is shown in his futile attempt to help the newcomer to the hospital in "A Long Time until Morning." The turning point in Charlie's attitude toward other people is found in "Some Talk of Dollar Bills," in which he discovers that he is unable to use people cynically and unfeelingly.

In discussing this collection and the development of thematic matters within it, it will be necessary to deal with

each story briefly in turn, in the order in which they appear. Particular attention will be paid to the third story, "Some Talk of Dollar Bills," where the turning point in Charlie's attitudes is the major concern.

In the first story of the collection, "The Garden," Charlie has just been discharged from the army and has returned home to a depressing family situation. Having been away from his parents for an extended period of time has opened his eyes to the condition in which they exist, which is basically a lifeless one. His realization of the existence of this situation and his futile attempt to do something about it provide a starting point for an examination of Charlie's own dilemma.

Charlie wakes up with a hangover in his old bedroom, a place that seems for a moment unfamiliar to him. His discomfort is increased by the sound of his parents arguing, which comes to him from another part of the house. Charlie sides with his father in this argument, which it seems is a continuing one, and says to himself, "Why doesn't he just once tell her to go to hell?"

The mother is a nagging woman, and although she is never actually seen, her presence broods over the whole story. For a moment Charlie thinks he sees her lying on the couch, staring at the "dead, opaque eye of the television set," and the elder Evans refers to both his smoking and his son's drinking in terms of the disapproval they would evoke in the mother.

Charlie's drinking at this point is already something that

he needs to face his world, as is indicated by the fact that he must have a drink before he even recognizes the presence of his father in the yard, and his mother's disapproval may well be warranted, but it is certain that she, who is the cause of many of Charlie's problems at this point, will be unable to do anything about this drinking.

When Charlie finally does admit to his father's presence, it is in terms of wanting to make the man show some sign of life. "Look alive!" Charlie says as he looks down at the old man tending the flower beds, but he is not heard. Charlie's first words upon seeing his father express the source of his concern about the old man. He is a walking dead man, a retired man who has nothing to do in life but tend his suburban lawn and be nagged by his wife. As Charlie sees him, his head appears to be "lifeless, skull-like." The thing that really bothers Charlie about this is that he recognizes a resemblance between his father and himself, and this frightens him. In the end of the story, when Charlie calls to the old man, who is going out to mow the lawn when it does not need it, and who is silhouetted against the background of the lifeless suburb, his warning that "you're dead if you go back out there," is partially for his father, but also partially for himself. Thus the fact that the old man cannot hear him becomes even more frightening, for perhaps Charlie will not heed his own warning.

In the second story, "The Wall," many of the things that trouble Charlie are brought out into the open and given concrete

forms. Here one learns that Charlie has been sensitized by a war experience to his inability to communicate. However, this war experience is not to be thought of as the one cause of Charlie's problems. This is brought out by his reaction during the series of hallucinations that lead him from one isolation to another. After he has relived the Korean battlefield incident, it is found that, "In a part of his mind he knew that the worst was over now, that the rest should be easier, but the panic had grown so big in his chest that he was barely able to breathe." For Charlie the culminating and most terrifying of these hallucinations is the encounter with the officer who is inspecting Charlie's barracks. Here Charlie is at the limit of his endurance, and it is significant that in this context one finds an echo of the metaphor of the dead eye of the television set in the dead eyes of the captain, which reflect Charlie's distorted image like the officer's buttons do.

At this point, when Charlie can stand no more, the girl he has called earlier enters the scene. Charlie attempts to use Ann to shut out the knowledge of his isolation, but this does not work. He has some misgivings about using her in this fashion, as he shows when he says, "Oh hell, I shouldn't have pulled you into this. It's not your problem." However, the important thing to note is that he does try to use her, but this is unsuccessful. He cannot even communicate sexually, and in the end of the story a "cold, opaque glare" rises in his mind, "like a wall." Here again, the "dead, opaque eye" of the

television set of the first story, which is so closely connected with the mother, is brought to mind.

"Some Talk of Dollar Bills" shows a different setting and a different stage in Charlie's development. By this time he is a married man, and he has managed to put his war experience out of his conscious mind, although of course the effects of this experience are still at work in him. Because of his wife's fears of economic insecurity, Charlie has been forced to take a job that he does not like, that of a used car salesman. At the beginning of the story he is found trying to reconcile himself to the practices of the business. Unwillingly he worries about the young boy who has been conned into buying a wreck of a car, but then he thinks, "What the hell, none of my business. Got to keep the buck in mind, I guess." This is Charlie's basic problem in this story, whether or not to accept the selfish use of other people that appears to be necessary for success in the car business.

Charlie has been placed in this situation by the demands of his wife, and the telephone conversation he has with her is a revealing one. She is depicted as a nagging woman whom Charlie dreads going home to, and she shows herself to be completely lacking in any understanding of Charlie's position. Her major, one might almost say her only interest is indicated when she asks, "Did you make any money today?" Charlie's reaction to this conversation is to think hopelessly, "I guess I'll just have to learn to live with it." This cannot be thought of as

any kind of real living, and it is thus revealed that the fear Charlie felt in "The Garden" that he might turn out like his father was to some extent justified.

After the appearance at the bar of Allen, Charlie's boss, Charlie again experiences a feeling of isolation, but now it is almost a pleasurable feeling, one that he feels he can use to his own advantage. He has the sensation of being behind a one-way mirror, and it seems to him that he can observe those around him without being seen himself. From his vantage point Charlie hears Allen expound his unfair business principles, and his reaction to this is, "That's the way it is, that's the way it's done. I can play the game just as well as they can." For the moment he has decided to accept the idea that other people exist for his own selfish use, and he impatiently puts out of his mind the thought of the boy who unknowingly bought the defective car.

It is important to note that in his acceptance of this selfish principle he keeps referring to his wife. "Just watch, Susie baby, watch the money roll in. Watch the bucks, the buck's the thing. It's all that matters." He has been forced into this acceptance by his wife, and it is obvious that he is not too sure of himself. He protests too much in his own mind.

The culmination of this story is Charlie's renouncing of a selfish use of people. Sitting in the apartment with Allen, Johnson, and the three prostitutes, he realizes that his boss and his fellow salesman both wear affable masks behind which

they hide "a petty, material greed." He finds that he cannot live like that, and his own mask falls from him. At this point he leaves the apartment, inviting the young prostitute who has reminded him of the cheated boy to go with him.

Implicit in Charlie's renunciation of the principle of selfish use of others is a renunciation of his wife. He may not consciously realize it, but his acceptance of the young prostitute as a human being involves a rejection of his wife, who is far gone toward being as filled with greed as Allen and Johnson are.

The realization on Charlie's part that he cannot use people like pawns, coupled with his continuing inability to communicate in any significant way, leads inevitably to the alcoholic ward of "A Long Time until Morning." Here, Charlie, a considerably older and, on the surface, tougher man, is thrown together with a young patient who reminds Charlie of himself at an earlier time. The plight of the newcomer leads Charlie to remember unwillingly the first time he was committed to the hospital. The situation that led to his being committed was much the same as the situation in which he found himself in the previous story. His attitude toward the car business and the greedy operators of the business was one of boredom and contempt, and he was still plagued with a nagging wife. It should be noted, however, that Charlie can now think of the time when he and his wife were in love. He can remember her with a feeling other than the dread and hopelessness with which he thought of her in

"Some Talk of Dollar Bills."

In the hospital, as in his drinking, he has found a temporary escape from the unendurable life he was leading. However, this life is brought in to him in the person of the newcomer, who instigates Charlie's reliving of his past experience. Charlie's dilemma has remained static, but there has been a change in him. Something inside him still screams about the isolation, the inability to communicate. "Nobody will talk to me. Nobody has anything to say!" However, Charlie hears this in his mind while he is trying to help another person, the newcomer. He is shaking the young man's shoulder, saying, "It's OK, buddy, it's OK now," and while it is apparent that it is definitely not OK and never will be, a morning of sorts has come for Charlie. He is able, because he is attempting to help another isolated human being rather than using him, to live at least without self-contempt.

THE GARDEN

Sunlight shining between the slats of the partially closed venetian blinds fell on the rumpled bed. A bar of light lay across Charlie Evans' face, emphasizing the dark hollows beneath his eyes. He moaned in his sleep and turned under the sheet, pressing his face against the pillow. He lay still for a moment, then with a sigh he turned again and threw off the sheet. His eyes opened to sunlight, and he winced, closing them quickly. Using his elbows for leverage, he pulled himself toward the head of the bed, leaned against the headboard, and opened his eyes again. His gaze rested blankly on the wall for a few moments. Then he turned and reached over to the night stand, shook a cigarette from a half empty package, and lighted it, his movements slow and careful.

As he replaced the lighter on the stand he inhaled smoke deeply and began to cough. When he had caught his breath, he said, "My God," and swung his feet to the floor. He sat and smoked, listening to a drone of voices that came from the living room. His actions became quicker as he moved the cigarette from his mouth to the ashtray and back again, and his bare foot began to tap against the floor.

He glanced rapidly around the room, as if to orient himself in a strange place. His gaze rested briefly on the battered army duffel bag lying in one corner, and his mouth twisted in a wry smile. As he ran his fingers through his matted hair the smile was erased by a wince. Controlling a slight tremor in

his fingers, he carefully ground out his cigarette in the half full ashtray on the night stand. He started to get up, then sank back down and sat, still hearing the indistinct murmur that filtered through the closed bedroom door. Occasionally the woman's voice rose in a petulant whine, then subsided again into a steady droning noise. Charlie breathed deeply, passed his hand over his suddenly sweating forehead, and said, "Why doesn't he just once tell her to go to hell?"

Finally the sound of voices ceased, and the front door of the house was opened and closed. Charlie jumped as a car motor roared to life in the driveway near his bedroom window. Then, as the car was driven away and the sound of the motor became faint in the distance, he rose, slipped on a pair of wrinkled slacks, and left the bedroom.

Passing through the living room on his way to the kitchen, Charlie paused and glanced quickly at the sofa and overstuffed chair arranged on one side of the room. The outlines of the furniture were indistinct because of the tightly closed blinds, but he could see that no one was there. Relieved, he sighed and continued through the room.

As he stood by the kitchen sink mixing a bourbon and water, Charlie glanced at the cupboards on each side of the sink and then at the dish rack on the counter. At no time did he look out of the window directly above the sink, although it was open and he could hear a muffled grating noise, as of someone digging in loose earth nearby. His drink mixed, he left the kitchen quickly

and returned to the darkened living room. After putting a record on the phonograph that was a part of the console model television set, he crossed the room and lowered himself slowly, carefully into the overstuffed chair, as if he were not certain that it would be there to support him. Then he settled gradually into the depression that had been made in the cushion by countless hours of sitting.

Half an hour later he still sat in the same position, rolling the empty glass between his palms. The phonograph clicked off, and the house was silent. He looked toward the sofa, half expecting to see his mother lying there sunken in a sea of pillows, her head turned toward the television set. Charlie shuddered and leaned forward in the chair, still rolling the glass in his hands. "God, it's quiet," he said. Then, following the eyes of the woman who was not there, he looked at the dead, opaque eye of the television set in the corner opposite him. He sat a few moments more, then broke the silence again as he laughed shortly. Suddenly, almost violently, he heaved himself out of the chair and walked heavily to the kitchen.

After pouring his second drink of the day he set the glass carefully on the counter and, placing a hand on either side of the sink, leaned deliberately toward the window. Looking down the street of the Detroit suburb he saw the progression of small, neat houses and well-trimmed lawns receding into the distance. All the lines and boundaries of the scene were sharply etched in the early summer sun, and when he looked at individual

objects they seemed almost two-dimensional. He could see nothing moving, but for a moment a breeze sprang up, carrying the faint shouts of children playing somewhere in the neighborhood. Then the breeze died, the sound of distant shouting faded, and Charlie became aware of a steady snipping noise coming from the yard below the window.

He pressed his hands hard against the counter, then, forcing himself to look down, he saw his father. The old man was on his knees, trimming the grass around one of a series of flower beds. Charlie's lips thinned, and two vertical creases appeared in his forehead as he frowned. He wanted to shout at the old man, make him jump. In an intense whisper he said, "Look alive!"

His expression relaxed as his father glanced up at the window.

"Hey, thought you were up, I heard the record player. Come on out and get some sun."

"All right." Charlie turned from the sink and drank deeply from his glass before moving toward the back door.

John Evans was standing in the yard smoking a cigarette when his son appeared at the corner of the building. "Good sleep?" he asked.

"Yeah." Charlie looked around the yard, thinking that the greenness of the grass was too uniform, too rich, that it seemed almost artificial. Glancing back at his father, he said, "Hey, I thought you weren't supposed to be smoking any more."

"Well, that's what they told me. But I still have a

cigarette now and then. When your mother isn't around, that is. She's a regular demon about that, so I try not to worry her, you know?" The old man puffed quickly, nervously on the cigarette as he waited for an answer.

"Yeah, sure, I know. Where is she, anyway?"

"At the grocery store. It's Saturday, remember? She wouldn't be too happy to see you drinking before noon, you know."

Charlie was staring at the neat row of flower beds where his father had been working, and he did not answer. After hesitating a few moments the old man went on hurriedly. "She's sort of disturbed about the way you've been acting since you got back from the army."

"That looks real nice."

"What? Oh, the flower beds?"

Charlie's voice was even, controlled, as he said, "Yeah, they're kind of like graves. Nice, well-tended graves, with the flowers just so and the grass clipped down short and even."

The old man laughed nervously and said, "What's this grave business? You've sure got some strange ideas lately. What's on your mind?"

"Oh, nothing much." Charlie squatted in the shade, his back against the wall of the house and his drink held in both hands between his knees. Looking up at his father he saw a tall, thin man with faded, lifeless gray hair and a drooping moustache. His shoulders were stooped, and his features were sharp, angular. The morning sun, shining behind him, emphasized the outline of

his face, leaving his eyes and mouth in shadow. In that light his head appeared lifeless, skull-like.

The old man drew on his cigarette, glanced at Charlie, then looked away. "Like I say, she's worried about you. I am too, a little. I guess I know how it is, you're at loose ends, just out of the army and all, but you seem so dissatisfied with everything."

Watching his father's profile as he talked, Charlie realized how much alike they looked, the old man and himself. The idea displeased, even frightened him. He drained his glass and set it on the lawn, rotating it and crushing the grass down beneath it. "I'm OK. What the hell, I've been tired, and now I'm finally getting rested up, that's all." He stood abruptly and plunged both hands deep into his pockets. The material of his slacks bulged briefly as he clenched his fists once, then relaxed them.

The old man, who was looking slowly around the yard, said, "I know how it is. I've felt tired a lot the last two years, since I retired. Went to the doctor, but all he did was tell me to quit smoking. Guess I just haven't had enough to keep my mind occupied." He brightened slightly; his face became more animated as he continued. "But I've got this big yard to take care of, and I painted the house this spring. Maybe I'll even plant a garden next spring. If your mother likes the idea, that is." He nodded toward the back of the lot. "Over there in the southeast corner would be a good place, there on the other side

of that rose bush next to the fence."

In his mind Charlie saw his father bending over and digging in the raw earth, and the idea chilled him. He shuddered and hunched his shoulders. "My God, what do you want a garden for? I mean, it'll be just like those damned flower beds. You don't want to spend the rest of your life grubbing around in the dirt, do you?"

"Oh, it'll give me something to do, I guess. Well, about that other business. Just take it easy and try to relax. You'll get over that itchy feeling soon. Be careful around your mother. She worries, you know."

The old man turned and started to walk toward a power lawnmower that was sitting on the concrete driveway in front of the garage. "I guess I'd better get the grass cut."

"I thought you mowed it Tuesday," Charlie said in a strained voice as he turned to follow his father.

"Well, I did, but it looks a little rough again. Grows fast, you know."

Charlie stopped walking and said hoarsely, "Good God, you mowed it the Friday before that, too, didn't you?"

The old man glanced over his shoulder at his son, gave an embarrassed laugh, and said, "Well, I can't let it get ahead of me."

Charlie watched his father bend over the machine, set the gas valve, and pull the starter rope. The motor caught, sputtered, then came to life. The old man straightened, and

Charlie saw him outlined against the series of flat, unreal houses and lawns that extended for the length of the suburban street, each a slightly smaller imitation of the one before. Charlie stood rigidly, his fists clenched at his sides. His lips drew back in a grimace, and his voice sounded high and unnatural as he forced it through clenched teeth. "Everybody's dead out there! Can't you understand, you're dead if you go back out there!" A cloud of oily exhaust fumes rose between them, and Charlie's father could not hear him over the roar of the motor.

THE WALL

Walking through the deserted campus, Charlie felt the autumn chill become more biting as the sun set. He shivered and pulled the army field jacket closer around his body. His pace quickened, and soon he was moving with a rapid, almost jerky stride. His body was bent forward, and his eyes searched the ground ahead of him. It had been a fine, cloudless day, and the warmth of the midday sunlight had almost made him forget that it was late October and the Michigan winter would soon begin. He shivered again as he thought of the bitter, numbing cold to come.

As he reached the street that marked the edge of the campus, Charlie saw dead leaves swirling in the gutter, moved by a sudden gust of wind. The wind became a steady force against his back, and he turned up his collar and ducked his head, trying to escape the cold air. He began to walk even faster, and the abruptness of his movements became more pronounced.

He hurried on until he came to a small commercial district not far from the campus, then his pace slowed. He stopped in front of a drug store and stood for a moment, undecided. Then he muttered, "What the hell," and entered the building. He stopped for a moment in front of a paperback book stand near the door, and his glance moved impatiently from title to title. Then he shrugged, turned and walked toward the back of the store.

The clerk behind the counter looked up from his ledger book and saw Charlie. "What do you say, Evans? How you doing?"

"All right, I guess. How about you?" Charlie forced

himself to smile.

"Oh, fine, just fine." The clerk leaned forward, his hands on the counter, his hairy, fleshy arms rigid. The glare from an unshaded overhead light was reflected by the man's bald forehead. The reflection caught Charlie's eye, and for a moment his mind was emptied of everything but the gleaming, blank surface.

The clerk said something that Charlie did not hear, and he shook his head, trying to force down a familiar feeling of panic that had seized him. "Sorry, what did you say?"

"Man, you're really off someplace tonight. Too much studying, huh? I said it's starting to get cold at night. Winter's almost here, I guess."

The panic controlled now, Charlie said, "Yeah, I guess it is."

"What'll it be, the usual?" Charlie nodded, and the clerk turned to the display case behind him, reaching for a fifth of bourbon. As he slipped the bottle into a paper bag and rang up the total on the cash register, he said, "Don't see how you drink this cheap stuff. It'd make me sicker than a dog."

Charlie laughed once, a short, sharp exhalation through his nostrils. "Just practice, that's all."

"Yeah, you get enough of that, all right. Must be about my best customer."

As the clerk handed him the bottle and his change, Charlie forced a smile again but did not answer. Then he turned and hurried toward the front door, the bottle tucked under his arm.

He had almost reached the front of the store when the clerk called after him. "Take it easy, Evans. See you later."

The last of the daylight was gone now, and as the door closed behind him Charlie sighed and relaxed slightly, glad to be out of the brightly lighted store and away from the clerk. Then he noticed that the air seemed even colder than before, and he hurried down the street, his head pulled down into his upturned collar.

A few minutes later he reached a two story frame building that had been converted into an apartment house. Without breaking stride he turned from the sidewalk and cut across the sparse, dead grass of the lawn toward the back of the building. At the door of his basement apartment he fumbled with his keys. His hands were cold and shaking slightly, and he could not find the right key immediately. Suddenly his patience broke. "God damn it!" he said. Then, finding the key, he laughed with that same abrupt, almost barking sound that had passed for a laugh earlier, in the drug store.

Inside the apartment he turned on a dim, shaded lamp in one corner, removed his jacket, and tossed it on the unmade bed. Then he hurried to the kitchen alcove with the bottle. There was barely room enough to open the door of the dented and scratched refrigerator in the corner of the room, but Charlie moved with practiced ease in the cramped space as he fixed a drink. While busy with this task, his concentration was complete, and his body, released from his mind, moved with a

grace that was quite different from the jerky, forced stride that had characterized his walk a few minutes earlier.

A full glass in his hand, Charlie turned, leaned against the half-partition that separated the kitchen area from the rest of the apartment, and looked out over the one large room in which he lived. The tension was still absent from his body, and the vertical frown lines between his eyebrows, usually prominent, were slightly softened. However, as his eyes moved over the room and its contents, the lines deepened, and his posture became more rigid. His gaze rested for a moment on the rumpled bed, then ranged to the bookcase made of bricks and unpainted boards. Next he looked at the gray walls, with their slightly peeling paint, and the dark blue overstuffed chair and its misshapen, lumpy cushion. He swirled the ice in his glass, then drank. "Empty," he said. "This place is empty."

He moved impatiently to the bookcase, picked up a geology text, and leafed through the first few pages. He read a paragraph, but the words seemed remote, unreal. Finally he tossed the text back on the shelf, where it hit another book. Both volumes fell to the floor, but Charlie made no move to pick them up. Staring for a moment at the impersonal covers of the books, he thought of the lecture halls that went with them, the brightly lighted auditoriums filled with the rustle of notebook paper and the dry drone of the lecturers' voices.

He felt the panic move in his chest again, and he drained his glass. Then he laughed. "Just too damned old to be a

student, that's all." The evening cold seemed to Charlie to be invading the room, making the basement apartment chill and damp. He shivered and turned to mix another drink.

Later, Charlie sat in the overstuffed chair in the darkest corner of the room. A large mixing bowl sat on the floor beside the chair, partially filled with cloudy water and the remnants of ice cubes. The bourbon bottle, half empty now, had been placed beside the bowl. On a small, scuffed table beside the chair was a radio that was tuned to an FM station. The reception seemed bad to Charlie. He reached for the dial and carefully made a minor adjustment, but it did not help. The music sounded disembodied to him, mechanical and remote. As the record came to an end and the music was replaced by the voice of an announcer, Charlie felt the panic in his chest. To him there was something horrible about the voice of the unseen announcer cheerfully addressing the empty air. Abruptly he reached over and twisted the dial, cutting off the forced cheerfulness of the voice. Speaking aloud in the empty room, Charlie said, "How in hell does he know there's anybody listening? How does he know he's not just talking to nothing?"

He picked up his wet glass, and it slipped half way through his fingers. Diluted bourbon splashed on the arm of the chair. "Damn," he muttered. He finished the drink and pushed himself out of the chair, lurching slightly. Then he walked with exaggerated care to the kitchen alcove and reached for a towel.

As he turned with the towel in his hand, Charlie thought

he heard a voice. He started, then laughed his barking laugh. "Radio. Didn't get it turned off." He recrossed the room and reached for the dial, but the radio was not on. In one continuous motion he threw himself into the chair and reached for the bottle. His hands shook as he poured liquor into the glass, and sweat began to form on his forehead. A pleading note came into his voice as he said, "No. No, not again." But his memory would not be blocked, and he was no longer in the safe, dim apartment.

A harsh, bright light illuminated the lecture hall. It was the first day of classes, and seats were being assigned. As the first few names on the roll were called, the panic mounted in him. Finally he heard it. "Evans. Evans. Mr. Evans." The glare from the overhead light was reflected by the glasses of the man on the raised platform as he leaned forward. Charlie could not see his eyes. The voice kept repeating, "Evans, Mr. Evans," but Charlie could not answer.

He was leaning forward in the overstuffed chair, his arms clutching his knees. His body rocked back and forth in time with his rapid, shallow breathing. Under his rumpled clothing he could feel sweat form, chilling him. Charlie forced himself to sit upright, then he picked up the glass from the table with both hands and drank until it was empty.

After putting the glass back on the table, he stood. Then he hurried across the room to the telephone, running into the telephone stand in his haste. He caught the instrument as it

teetered on the edge of the stand, lifted the receiver, and began to dial feverishly. As he waited, listening to the repeated ringing, he nervously shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

Finally the ringing stopped and was replaced by a sleepy, irritated voice. Charlie responded to this voice, saying, "Jeanie? Hi, baby, this is Charlie, Charlie Evans." He rushed on, not giving her a chance to answer. "Just thought I'd give you a ring and see how everything's going. I mean, I was just sitting here, and I got to thinking about you, and . . ." His voice went on, and Charlie was powerless to stop it. He was talking faster and faster, and his words were running together and becoming unintelligible.

Finally the woman interrupted him, her voice sounding metallic and distorted. "Charlie, what are you talking about? Are you drunk again? What do you want, anyway?"

He laughed the short, barking laugh and said, "Oh, like I said, I was just sitting here, and I happened to think that I hadn't seen you in a while. Just wondering if you wanted to come over. Thought we might have a few laughs, that's all."

"Charlie, it's after midnight. You must be nuts or something. I'm not going over to that apartment of yours at this time of night. I have to get up in the morning. Go to bed and sleep it off."

Charlie heard a click and then the dial tone. He stared at the receiver for a moment, then carefully replaced it in the

cradle. He stood, his arms hanging limply at his sides and his eyes staring unseeingly at the peeling paint on the wall. Then he sighed, reached for the telephone, and dialed another number.

He waited for the answer at the other end of the line, then he said quietly, "Ann, this is Charlie. Can you come over? It's important." He listened for a few moments, then said, "Thanks, Ann. I'll be looking for you."

Then he replaced the receiver, walked back to the chair, and sat. He picked up the empty glass and began to roll it slowly between his palms as he waited.

A whispering voice called to him, and Charlie strained forward to hear the words, his numbed body tensing on the frozen ground. "Let's go, Evans. Got to move now. Come on, let's roll it." The speaker's shadow loomed up to the left. Charlie stood, his legs shaking from exhaustion and the cold, and followed the indistinct form of the sergeant. Suddenly the winter night was cut by a wall of harsh, white light and the crackle of automatic rifle fire.

Charlie dropped to the ground, the knuckles of his left hand, which clutched the rifle barrel, striking the rough, frozen mud painfully. He saw the sergeant, distinct now in the glare of the search light, stumble and fall heavily to the ground. The sound of firing ceased, and the light went off, leaving the Korean night untouched, unchanged. Charlie heard a voice, his own, calling, "Williams? Williams? You OK? Williams?"

Charlie stirred in the chair, rocking forward and clasping

his arms around his knees again. In a part of his mind he knew that the worst was over now, that the rest should be easier, but the panic had grown so big in his chest that he was barely able to breathe. As he straightened in the chair and tried to draw air deeply into his lungs, he unconsciously rubbed the knuckles of his left hand against the arm of the chair.

The white glare was even more intense now, and Charlie had to squint to see the form bending above him. Although something was covering him, the cold was worse, and his body was shaking uncontrollably. As the form bent nearer, an arm, grotesquely bulky in the winter clothing, was stretched toward him. The hand touched his forehead, and Charlie tried to jerk away. Then he saw the red cross arm band. As the face came nearer, he could see the dark circles of fatigue under the medic's eyes.

A voice behind the medic said, "How's this one?"

The medic turned toward the voice, and Charlie heard him say, "He's OK. Just shock. What's next?"

"Wait a minute. What's his name?"

"Evans. I already got the tag made out. Let's hurry up and get this bunch loaded."

Charlie's body rocked back and forth in the chair. The movement was accompanied by the ragged, gasping sound of his breathing.

He stood rigidly beside the steel army cot, staring at the second button of the captain's coat. The button shone so brightly that he could see a distorted image of himself in it.

"Evans, your foot locker is messy. Do you understand, Evans? Messy."

"Yes sir," Charlie said, and he raised his gaze to see the same distorted image repeated in the dead, impersonal eyes.

When the knock sounded at the door, he was making the short, bark-like noise every few moments. It sounded like his laugh, but his head was thrown back and his eyes were tightly closed. The tendons of his neck stood out, and his fists repeatedly clenched and unclenched.

Hearing the knock, Charlie threw himself out of the chair, stumbled, then almost ran to the door. He fumbled with the night lock, and when he finally succeeded in opening the door he seized the girl by the shoulders and drew her into the room. He pulled her convulsively to him, feeling the reassuring pressure of her breasts against his chest. "My God, I'm glad you're here."

She pulled back from him, startled. "What is it, Charlie? What's the matter? Then, looking around the room, she saw the chair and the area around it. "Charlie, you're drunk." She pulled back even more, turning as if to go.

He drew himself up and stood rigidly for a moment, his eyes closed. Then he laughed, making the same short, sharp sound. "Well, maybe a little, I guess. But it's all right. Don't worry, I'm all right." He moved toward her, saying, "Come on, sit down. I'll take your coat. You want a drink?" She shook her head and let him take her coat, which he immediately draped

over a kitchen chair. He took her hand and led her further into the room, still talking. "You know how it is, sometimes you get lonely, that's all. I just suddenly decided I'd like to see you, you know?"

As they sat down on the edge of the bed, she said, "Fine, Charlie, I'm glad you called me. You know I always like to see you. But what's wrong? I don't understand. What's bothering you?"

Charlie drew his feet up, leaned forward, and clasped his knees. "Oh, it's nothing to worry about. I'm just a little jumpy and depressed, that's all." Abruptly he straightened and set his feet on the floor. "You sure you don't want a drink?"

"No, I don't think so. Are you going to have another?" She hesitated, glancing at him nervously. "I mean, you've had quite a bit."

"No, what the hell, I don't need it." His lips drew back in a tight smile. "You're here to keep my company." He stopped smiling, thought for a moment, then said, "Oh hell, I shouldn't have pulled you into this. It's not your problem."

She shook her head, and the long, dark brown hair swayed. "I'm glad you called, Charlie. I'll try to help, if you'll just tell me what's wrong."

He sighed, and his shoulders slumped. Then he put his arm around her waist. "Ah, Ann baby, I'm glad you came. It's all right now. No problem now." He drew her closer, and she lowered her head to his shoulder.

They sat quietly for a while, then Charlie began to tap his foot restlessly. Finally he shrugged and said, "I need a drink."

He started to rise, but she pulled him back. "Please stay here, Charlie. Don't drink any more." She placed her hand on his cheek, turned his head toward her, and kissed him. They stretched out together on the bed, and in a few moments he began to stroke her breasts, his hand shaking.

Lying against him, she put her arms around his neck, but when he started to loosen her clothing, she pushed him away and said, "Oh no, Charlie, don't. I promised myself it wouldn't happen again."

But he continued to stroke her, saying, "Ah, Ann, Ann. It's all right. It's all right now."

He helped her to undress, his movements becoming almost frantic. After quickly pulling off his own clothes, he lay beside her, holding her tightly against him. He felt the panic rising again, but he tried to force himself to relax. He stroked her smooth, young, unmarked body for a long time, but it was futile. She was breathing heavily and trying to pull him closer, but he felt no corresponding passion. Finally he fell away from her, exhausted.

Raising herself on one elbow, Ann put her other hand on his chest. "What's wrong, Charlie? What's the matter?"

In the dim light he could see tears starting to form in the corners of her eyes. He said, "It's no use. No use. I can't do it." His voice sounded unreal, muffled in his own ears.

"What's wrong? I don't understand. What's happened to you?" The tears were running down her face now.

In the same dead, dull voice, Charlie heard himself saying, "Just too much whiskey, that's all."

"That's not it. There's something else. Tell me what it is. Please tell me." But he was not able to answer her.

She was sobbing now, and Charlie held her, feeling the soft pressure of her young breasts. Her face was against his shoulder, and he could feel the warmth of her tears on his flesh. He stroked her back, saying, "It's all right, it's all right." In his mind the cold, opaque glare began to rise again, like a wall.

SOME TALK OF DOLLAR BILLS

Charlie stood in the doorway of the two room frame building that served as an office for the used car lot. His hands were on his hips and his feet set far apart. As he surveyed the monotonously regular rows of automobiles before him, he changed his position, leaning against the door frame and slumping slightly. Looking toward the far end of the lot, he sighed as he saw the four year old maroon convertible being driven away. "Bought it, did he?" he muttered, noticing that the driver was the young man he had seen talking with Johnson, the other salesman, a few minutes before.

The car reached the street, turned, and moved past the end of the lot where the office was located. As the convertible passed him, Charlie saw that the driver, a dark haired boy of no more than twenty, was smiling happily. As the car pulled away from the intersection the boy turned and waved to Johnson. Charlie thought, "Must not know a damn thing about wheels. He'll be lucky if it's still running next week."

Charlie shifted his position again, trying to get the late afternoon sun out of his eyes. Then he shivered slightly, wishing that he had thought to wear a heavier jacket. Although it was mid-April, there was still a chill in the air, especially now that the sun was going down. He tilted his head back, finally managing to get his eyes in the shadow of the sign that hung above the front of the lot. Idly, he read the sign. "ALLEN MOTORS - USED CARS" "And man, are they used," he thought.

He rubbed his eyes as his mind shifted to another subject.

"God, I'm glad it's Wednesday. Be closing up soon. Wonder if I'll ever get used to these damned hours."

Looking toward the far end of the lot again, Charlie saw Sam Johnson trudging toward him. The sun caught in Johnson's red hair, giving it an unnatural brilliance. Charlie thought, as he had many times in the past two months, how strange the red hair looked on the man. Somehow it didn't go with his fat body and short legs. The hair, combined with the open, friendly smile, gave him a strangely youthful look that contradicted the apparent age of his body. And there was something else about the man that bothered Charlie. As he watched Johnson's plodding approach, he realized that it was the man's walk. "He always looks like he's going uphill," Charlie thought, and he grinned at the idea.

"What are you so happy about, Evans? I'm the guy that just sold a car." Johnson had stopped a few feet in front of Charlie.

"Huh? Oh, that's what I was thinking about. Just wondering how far the kid will get with that junker."

"Yeah, funny, isn't it? You'd think a guy his age would know more about cars. Wouldn't surprise me if he had it in the garage tomorrow." He started forward again, saying, "Well, that's his problem, not mine. Guess I'd better get my commission slip made out."

Charlie stepped aside, and the fat man went into the office. The deep vertical lines between Charlie's eyebrows lengthened

as he frowned for a moment, thinking. Then he shrugged, and his face cleared. "What the hell, none of my business. Got to keep that in mind, I guess."

Johnson's voice came from inside the building. "What did you say?"

"Oh, nothing. Just talking to myself."

Johnson reappeared in the doorway. "It's the weather. Spring. Enough to make anybody talk to himself. Sure makes the cars move, though. Especially convertibles, like that maroon job. People go nuts for them this time of year." He hesitated, glancing at Charlie, then continued. "You got spring fever. What you need is a good night on the town. It'll take the rough edges off. Why not come along with me tonight?"

"Well, thanks, but I'd better get home. My wife's expecting me."

"What the hell, how long you been married?"

"Over a year now, why?"

"Then it's time you taught her the facts of life. Hell, a man can't go right home every night. He'd go nuts or something." Johnson rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet, nodding his head in agreement with his own statement. Charlie was surprised to notice that the man seemed nervous. "Besides," Johnson continued, "the old man'll be there. Everybody goes to the Tap Room on Wednesday nights. Come on, it'll do you good."

Charlie could imagine his wife's reaction. He hesitated, thinking, "This will give her an excuse to start another fight,

and I could do without that." He considered for a moment, thinking of the boredom of his job. Then he said, "Oh, I guess I might as well. Maybe I do need a change of scenery."

Within a few minutes the two of them were closing the lot for the night. As he turned from locking the office door, Charlie noticed that the showroom of Allen's Lincoln-Mercury dealership across the street was already closed, and that the spotlights that illuminated the display cars during the night were being turned on. "Not a bad idea to get acquainted with the boss," he thought. "Might come in handy." He smiled wryly.

Half an hour later Charlie and Johnson were seated at the bar of an elaborately decorated night spot. Charlie rested his arms on the black leather that padded the edge of the bar and looked around the room. The black leather padding was repeated on the booths and chairs, and half way up the walls a strip of the same leather extended around the entire room. The darkness of the padding was relieved only by an occasional glint of metallic gold trim. The lights were dim, but Charlie could see the gleam of the gold trim reflected in the mirror behind the bar. It seemed to Charlie that the contrast presented by the dull darkness of the leather and the gleam of the trim made everything between these two extremes look fuzzy, lacking in definite outline.

The place was filling rapidly, and Charlie could hear a rising hum of conversation that seemed partially muted, muffled by the black leather padding. Occasionally he heard disconnected

bits of the talk around him, and he found that most of it was about cars, dealerships, financing, and auto loans. Turning to Johnson, he said, "What is this, a club for car people?"

Johnson laughed. "Just about. Especially on Wednesday nights, when all the lots are closed." Johnson glanced quickly around the room. He raised his glass in greeting to someone at the opposite end of the bar, then turned back to Charlie.

"Evans, hold my seat for a minute, will you? I see a guy I need to talk to."

Charlie said, "Sure," then turned to watch Johnson hurry toward the man he had greeted, extending his hand for shaking before he had covered half the distance between them. Charlie was again struck by the fat man's apparent nervousness. As he sat, moving his half empty glass on the bar and leaving patterns of overlapping circles of moisture on the formica surface, he wondered what was on Johnson's mind.

Soon his thoughts turned to another, more pressing problem. "Suppose I really ought to call Susan. Do that before I have another drink." His mind shied away from the thought of the conflict the phone call would arouse. "Better watch it on the drinks, too. Don't want the boss to think I'm a lush. If he shows up, that is."

He hesitated a few moments longer, then stood up and walked slowly to the telephone booth near the door at the front of the room.

He dropped his coin and dialed, then extracted a cigarette

from his shirt pocket and lighted it as he waited. Finally the ringing stopped. He listened for a moment, hearing his wife's voice. Then he said, "Hi, Sue. This is Charlie. Hope you haven't started supper yet."

"Well, I haven't, but why?"

"I guess I won't be home until late. This guy that works with me invited me out, and I guess the boss is going to show up later, too."

"Charlie, I expected you home." He could hear the edge in her voice.

"I realize that, honey, but I didn't know I'd be late till just a few minutes ago. You understand, don't you?" He listened for her response, dreading the note of bitterness he knew would be in it.

"Sure, sure, I understand. Someone offered you a chance to stay away from home, and you jumped at it." Abruptly she changed the subject. "Did you make any money today?"

"Well, I made one sale."

"Oh, fine, just fine. One sale this month, and you're on commission. When are they going to put you on a real salary? I'm getting tired of this business."

His temper rising, Charlie breathed deeply through clenched teeth. "You're getting tired! What in the hell do you think I feel like? You know that I don't like this lousy business anyway, but I'm sticking to it because of you. I didn't want to take the job in the first place, but you said I should, said

we needed it till something better came along." Realizing that he was almost shouting, he made an effort to lower his voice. "Well, nothing has come along, and I'm doing the best I can. If you don't like it, that's too bad."

"Oh, forget it," she said dully. "Come home when you get ready."

The line went dead, and Charlie sat for a moment with the receiver against his ear. He breathed deeply again, trying to relax. Finally he hung up, opened the door of the phone booth, and started back toward his seat at the bar. As he made his way through the crowd of early evening drinkers, he felt the anger leave him, and in its place was the question of what had happened to change Susan. "Only a year married," he thought, "and it's all gone to hell." He had reached the point where he dreaded being with her, dreaded witnessing her increasing preoccupation with money. As he sat down again at the bar, he thought, with a feeling of hopelessness, "Guess I'll just have to learn to live with it."

Johnson soon returned, and they both ordered drinks. As they were being served, Johnson glanced toward the door and said, "Here's the old man. Told you he'd be here."

Charlie turned to look toward the front of the bar and saw the tall, graying man start toward them. Allen carried his slightly fleshy body easily, confidently. On his face Charlie saw the same apparently open, friendly smile that was almost a permanent feature of Johnson's face. As Allen crossed the room

he nodded and spoke to several people. As he nodded the lenses of his horn-rim glasses occasionally caught the dim light, and they glinted in the semi-darkness of the bar.

When Allen reached Charlie and his companion, he said, "Hello, Sam. Hi there, Evans, glad to see you. About time you joined the club."

"Hello, Mr. Allen. It's nice to see you."

"The first thing to learn about me, Evans, is that I don't go by mister. There's no room for formality in the car business. I judge a man by how many cars he sells, not by how polite he is to me. That right, Sam?"

"Sure is, George. Here, why don't you sit down?" Johnson moved over to the next bar stool, leaving a vacant spot between himself and Charlie.

"All right, I believe I will. Allen placed himself in the central position between his two salesmen and nodded to the bartender, who immediately began to mix a drink. "How was business at the lot today?"

"Pretty good," Johnson said. "I unloaded that maroon job on some kid that came in."

Allen turned toward Johnson, immediately alert. "Get the asking price?"

"Sure. He didn't know what hit him."

Allen leaned back, grinned, and said, "That's the way to do it. Hit them hard and fast, and get them signed up before they know what they're doing." Turning to Charlie, he continued.

"Remember that, Evans. That's the way to make money in this business."

Charlie nodded and finished his drink. As Allen and Johnson continued to talk about sales made that day, Charlie looked at his dim reflection in the mirror behind the bar. The double bourbons he had drunk were beginning to affect him. There was a faint buzzing in his ears, and he felt cut off, isolated from the other two men. "That's right," he thought. "Remember the buck. That's right, Susan, baby. That's right, Allen."

"Hey, Evans. Why so glum? You need another drink. Here, get this man a drink." Charlie started to protest, but Allen had already taken his glass and handed it to the bartender. "I was just telling Sam, here, about the first sale I ever made. I'd been trying for two weeks, and I was getting pretty discouraged, I guess. Then this old man came in. The old boy looked like he'd never owned a car in his life and was about half scared of the idea, but by the time I got through with him . . ."

Allen continued to talk, but Charlie stopped listening. He had heard the story the first day he had gone to work for Allen. His mind returned to the boy who had bought the convertible that afternoon, and he remembered the happy look on the boy's face as he drove away. "Oh, hell," Charlie thought. "That's his problem. If he doesn't have sense enough to know what he's buying, it's his hard luck."

Allen had stopped talking, and Charlie realized that he

should make some response. "Sure, sure, I understand. That's the way to do it, all right."

Satisfied, Allen turned to talk to Johnson. Charlie finished his drink and ordered another.

It grew later, and as Charlie kept drinking, his feeling of isolation grew stronger. He stared at his image in the mirror for a long time, then he began to watch the reflections of his companions. Allen dominated the scene, the occasional gleam of his glasses vying with the glint of the gold trim in the decorative scheme. As he watched the image of the talking man, he had the feeling that he was actually on the other side of the glass looking through at the people in the bar. When spoken to he answered in monosyllables, but he had no idea what he said. The scope of Charlie's inspection had widened to include the whole bar. The place was full now, and he could hear a constant rattle and clink of glasses. Over this sound he heard the noise of the juke box. It seemed to Charlie that every number played had the same rhythm. The words of the songs were indistinct, muffled by the padded room, but he heard always the vibrating, compelling rhythm of a string bass on which the same chord was played over and over.

In the foreground of the scene were Johnson and Allen. Allen was talking, and Johnson nodded in agreement whenever Allen paused. At times Charlie heard parts of Allen's monologue, which seemed to be set to the urgent rhythm of the bass. "Nine hundred dollars . . . he never knew what hit him . . . the frame

of that heap was so sprung that . . . just get their names on the line . . ."

"OK," Charlie thought. "That's the way it is, that's the way it's done. I can play the game just as well as they can. Just watch, Susie baby, watch the money roll in. Watch the bucks, the buck's the thing. It's all that matters."

Suddenly he felt a hand on his arm. "Hey, Evans. Wake up, boy. It's still early." Charlie turned to see Allen standing behind him. "Too early to quit, that's for sure. I've got something lined up for us. Come on."

"Huh? Oh, sure, sure." Confused, Charlie stared at the man.

"Well, don't just sit there. Come on, let's go."

Charlie nodded dumbly, stood, and followed Allen and Johnson out of the bar. He rode with Johnson, and as they followed Allen's car, Charlie said, "I don't want to seem stupid or anything, but what's up? Where we going?"

"Man, you really were out of it back there. You'll have to learn to hold your liquor better than that, if you want to keep up with the old man." Johnson was wearing his usual smile, but Charlie thought there was something secretive, nervous in his expression. "He's got us lined up with some girls he knows. We're on our way to their apartment. Going to be a big time tonight."

Charlie leaned forward and started to speak, then he leaned back again into the dark corner of the car. The illusion of

being behind the mirror was still with him, and he felt that Johnson could not really see him. "Sure," he thought. "It figures. And why not, what difference does it make? As long as you keep your eye on the buck, that's all that matters."

By the dim light of the dashboard Charlie watched Johnson, who kept glancing at him, waiting for his response. Although the smile was still in place, there were beads of sweat on the fat man's forehead, and he continually shifted his grip on the steering wheel. "Might as well, I guess," Charlie said.

Johnson relaxed slightly and said, "That's good. The old man likes to have everyone have a good time. Likes to see a man enjoy himself." He drove on in silence, and Charlie noticed that his posture soon stiffened again, and he held the steering wheel tightly with both hands.

When they entered the apartment there was a babble of greetings and introductions. The light in the room seemed too bright to Charlie, and for the moment he felt naked, unprotected. Then someone turned off the bright light, and the room was illuminated only by the shaded glow of a table lamp. Charlie felt that the mirror was in place again, that he was again an observer.

He saw one of the girls take the bottle Allen had brought. As the bottle passed between them, Charlie saw Allen slip a folded bill into the girl's free hand. "Might have known," Charlie thought. "Always the buck." He laughed shortly.

A second girl took his hand and said, "Something funny,

lover?" Without waiting for an answer, she continued, "Come on, lover, let's sit down. We'll have some drinks in a minute. As she led him toward a couch across the room, Charlie saw that she was slim and had short, blonde hair. He was surprised to notice that her walk was graceful, attractive. Watching the movement of the girl's hips, he thought, "High priced merchandise." As they sat he turned to look at her face and was surprised again. She was much younger than he had expected, not more than nineteen or twenty, and her features were pleasantly regular.

As he inspected her, her lips parted in a wide grin.

"Satisfied?"

"You'll do," Charlie said, the words feeling unfamiliar as his lips formed them.

"Oh, here's our drinks." The girl turned, and following her glance, Charlie saw Allen coming toward them with two full glasses.

He handed a glass to each of them, saying, "Here you go. Have fun, you two. Try to wake him up, Patty. He's been dead all evening."

"Don't worry," the girl said. "We'll get along."

Charlie finished that drink and another that the girl brought to him. They were all smoking, and the room was filled with a drifting haze. Conversation droned on around him, dominated by Allen's voice. For a moment Charlie thought they were back in the bar. Then he began to listen to what Allen was saying. "That's right, honey. Made a killing last week. This

spring weather is great for the car business. Really brings the lookers out, and if they look while I'm around, they'll soon find themselves owning a car."

Charlie looked across the room and saw Allen sitting in a large overstuffed chair. His collar was unbuttoned and his tie loosened. One of the girls, a tall brunette, was sitting on his lap. Her skirt had slid up, and Allen's hand was on the bare flesh of her leg, above the knee. The hand moved steadily, mechanically, in a perfunctory caress, and Allen seemed unaware of it as he continued to talk. "Last month we moved over two hundred cars, and this month . . ." He was smiling, as usual.

Charlie looked at a couch near where Allen and the brunitte were sitting, and there he saw the same smile repeated on Johnson's face. Johnson had his arm around the shoulders of the third girl, and his bulk blocked Charlie's view of her. As he watched Johnson, Charlie saw a sheen of nervous sweat on the face of the fat man.

Looking from one man to the other, from the nervous expression presented by Johnson to Allen's bland face, Charlie realized that Johnson's smile was an imitation of Allen's, and that they both were masks that hid a petty, material greed.

He shuddered, and the girl beside him said, "What's wrong, lover? A little sick?"

He turned toward her and saw that she was grinning up at him. Looking at her, he was reminded of the boy who had bought the convertible that afternoon. Again he saw the boy driving the

car away, a real smile on his face as he turned to wave to Johnson.

Charlie leaned forward to set his empty glass on the table, suddenly realizing that he was quite drunk. The glass slipped from his fingers and shattered on the floor. As the glass broke, Charlie felt his mirror, his mask, begin to crack and disintegrate.

Charlie stood and gazed across the room, through the smoky air. Allen's smile seemed a little strained; he looked annoyed. Johnson appeared startled and confused. As he turned toward the door, Charlie said, "I need some fresh air." He nodded to the girl who had been sitting with him. "Come along if you like."

A LONG TIME UNTIL MORNING

The darkness of the room was almost complete, except near the windows where a faint glow from a street light invaded the room, making a metal bedstead gleam dully. The only sounds to be heard were the heavy breathing and intermittent snores of the other patients. Evans lay awake, listening.

A voice from the newcomer's bed, harsh and jarring, suddenly broke the silence of the ward. "Where the hell am I? What is this place?"

"A hospital, buddy," said Evans.

"Hospital? What for? I'm not sick."

"Yeah? Looked like something was wrong when they brought you in today. You weren't too lively."

"Hell, there's some kind of mistake. I wasn't sick, I was drunk."

"Yeah, I noticed. Don't worry, buddy, you're in the right place."

Evans heard the sound of rustling sheets, then a sharp gasp. "What is this? I can't move. I'm tied down!"

"Relax, you're just strapped in bed. They do that to everybody the first night in. Just in case you wake up and feel like going someplace."

"Who are you? What kind of a place is this? Damn it, I got to get out of here." The sheets rustled again, and Evans heard the sound of creaking leather.

"You might as well stop pulling at those straps. It won't

do you any good. If you'll shut up a minute, I'll try and explain." Evans lighted a cigarette, and the flare of the big kitchen match briefly illuminated his fleshy, heavily lined face. After shaking out the match he inhaled smoke and continued. "This here is a drying-out ward. You get put in here when your family or whoever it is gets sick of picking you up off the streets. Me, I'm voluntary. This is my third time in. Been here three months now."

"My God, how do I get out of here?"

"Little thirsty, are you? I know how it is. The first couple of days are always the toughest. Here, let's see how you're making out." Evans stood up, shuffled barefoot to the newcomer's bed, and struck a match, holding it over the head of the bed.

The wavering flame revealed a thin face, sweat beaded and unnaturally pale in the yellow light. The young man's mouth was tightly closed, and muscles bulged along his unshaven jaw line as he clenched his teeth. He turned his face to the wall, away from the light, shutting his eyes quickly. "What're you trying to do, blind me?" He kept his face averted for a moment, then slowly turned back to look at Evans, his eyes squinting. "Hey, you've got the run of this place, you can help me. Hell, there's just been a mistake, that's all." He tried to smile, but a twitch in the corner of his mouth marred the effect. As he continued talking, the words came faster and faster. "Just get me loose from this bed, and I'll do the rest. That's all, just

let me up, and I'll be gone. How about it?"

The match died, and Evans turned back toward his own bed. His voice was softer than before as he said, "Sorry, buddy, I can't do it. They'd know it was me."

"But Christ, man, I've got to have a drink!"

"Hang on buddy, you'll make it." Evans climbed into bed, sighed, and pulled the sheet up to his waist. He lay on his back, his hands clasped under his head, and tried not to hear the harsh rattle of the young man's heavy breathing.

Finally the room was quiet again, except for the noises made by the sleeping patients. Evans listened to see if there would be anything more from the newcomer, hoping that he was asleep, not wanting to listen to any more pleading. The snores, occasional groans, and creaking of hospital beds were constant reminders of the presence of the others in the room. He wondered if anyone else was lying awake in the dark, but then he guessed that he was the only one, he was alone. Practically everyone in the ward was on sleeping pills.

He turned onto his side and drew his knees up, trying to fall asleep, but his mind kept working. "Sure sleep good, these guys do. Must be nice to be clear out of it for a whole night like that. Maybe I ought to get ahold of some of those pills. No, no use kidding myself, they won't do the trick. Only one thing'll do it right, really do it."

Turning restlessly in bed, he forced himself to think about the newcomer. "He's a kid, really. Can't be more than twenty-

four or so. How old was I the first time around? Thirty, I guess. I lasted longer than he did," Evans started to laugh but stopped suddenly as he thought of the young man's face.

"He must have been pretty far gone when they got him. Looked like he'd claw a hole in the wall if he could get loose. Must have been on a good long drunk. Yeah, a good, long drunk."

Evans began to sweat. He drew his knees up closer to his body and clenched his fists, muttering, "Jesus Christ, here we go."

It was a half hour later when he forced himself to roll over onto his back and straighten his legs. He breathed deeply several times, then threw back the sheet and sat up, swinging his feet to the floor. He lighted a cigarette with trembling hands and sat, smoking, as the slow, silent minutes of the night passed.

Shortly after three o'clock the newcomer began moaning. He whimpered, then started to make a steady humming noise, as if he were forcing the sound through clenched teeth. Evans knew the sound well, the sound and the kind of dream that went with it. He moved quickly to the young man's bed as the moaning became louder. He rested his hand on the sleeper's shoulder, feeling the muscle twitch and shudder. As he slowly increased the pressure of his hand, he said quietly, "OK, buddy, OK. It's all right. Come on, wake up now, that's it, buddy, wake up."

The young man stopped moaning and strained against the leather straps that held his arms, trying to move away from Evans. "Who are you?" he whispered.

"Relax, buddy, relax. It's just me, Evans, the guy in the ward. You're in the hospital, remember?"

The young man sighed shakily, and his breathing began to slow. "Oh, yeah. Sure, I remember. Dying-out ward? What am I doing here?"

"Look, don't try to con me. You know what you're here for just as well as I do. Was it a bad one? The dream, I mean."

"Yeah, falling. Didn't think I'd ever stop. My God." The newcomer's voice had begun to shake again.

"All right, take it easy. There's nothing to get excited about. Just take it easy and ride with it, that's all you can do. And try to keep it down, or we'll have the whole hospital in here." Evans stood by the bed for a moment, listening to the harsh breathing slow again. Finding that he was holding his arms stiffly at his sides, he forced himself to relax, shrugged, and turned away from the young man. "Why me?" he thought. "Why'd they have to stick him next to me?"

As he slipped under the sheet he thought, "Yeah, I was a few years older than he is. Not much, though. I was working at the car lot then." He laughed shortly in the darkness. "I couldn't have had a job sweeping out the show room after that little episode."

Abruptly, Evans sat up in bed. "No use, no sense in it," he muttered. He lighted another cigarette and lay back, watching the tiny glow move as his hand trembled.

The newcomer began to struggle against the straps again, and

Evans said, "Easy, buddy, easy. You're all right."

The ward was quiet for a few moments, then the newcomer said, "Hey."

"Yeah?"

"What day is it?"

"It's Thursday. How long you been drunk?"

"God, I don't know. Little over a week, I guess. I remember things here and there, but most of it's pretty blurred."

The newcomer lapsed into silence again, and Evans could tell from the change in his breathing that the young man was asleep. "Yeah," he thought, "must have been a good one. Sounds like some that I've been on. Like that one that landed me in this place the first time. It must have been a couple of months before I had enough information to piece everything together. I knew right away when I woke up here that it had started at a party at the boss's house, though. Yeah, I remembered that party all right. I bitched myself up good that night, and that started everything."

Evans laughed, a single harsh sound in the darkness, then said, "You know better than that. It started earlier, a hell of a lot earlier."

He hadn't intended to speak aloud, and the sound of his own voice startled him. Listening, he decided that he hadn't awakened anyone. Unbidden, his mind returned to a recounting of the earlier time.

"They kept asking me if I had a reason, all the doctors and

everyone. Hell yes, sure, I had a reason. Those damned people bored me. I didn't want to go to the party in the first place, but Susan insisted. We got there late, because I wanted to stop for a couple of drinks on the way, and when we walked in Allen was telling some story. Old Allen, what a boss. He damn near drove me crazy. Always telling some story, and it was always the same one. He was talking about conning some sucker on a car, unloading a dog. But I didn't listen. I just got myself a drink and started thinking about Susan."

The newcomer started to cough. Evans could hear, almost feel the gagging rattle shake the young man. Finally the coughing stopped, and as the newcomer gasped for breath, Evans said, "You OK, buddy? Make it all right?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm all right. My God, I want out of here. Get me out."

As the voice trailed off Evans returned unwillingly to the endless story, told and retold in his mind. "Sure, I started thinking about Susan, my wife, Susan. She was sitting right there, eating up every word old Allen said. She figured we'd ought to butter him up that night. She'd been on my back for weeks, trying to get me to hit him up for a raise. That's what we were doing at the party. When she heard the boss was throwing one, right away she said, 'We're invited, aren't we?'

"I told her I guessed we were, but I didn't feel much like going. I tried to tell her how much those damned people bored me, but that just set her off. I can still hear her. 'Yes, and

that's why you don't make any more money than you do,' she said. 'We're going to that party, and you're going to get a raise. I'm sick of not ever having any money. You ask him tonight, when he's feeling good.'

Sitting there at Allen's looking at her, I remembered what she had said. Because it seemed funny, like she was just talking at me, not to me. When I tried to tell her why I didn't want to go, it didn't make any difference to her. We used to talk to each other a lot sometimes. Like late at night, in bed. Susan and I'd talk about plans and us and, oh hell, anything. But that was a long time ago."

Evans ground his cigarette out in the ashtray, concentrating on killing the last spark. He turned his head toward the newcomer's bed, wondering if he was asleep. Now he wished that the young man wanted to talk. His hands were shaking more than they had been before.

"There I was," he remembered, "sitting at that damned party and not listening to the story Allen was telling. I had a good buzz anyway, from the drinks I'd had on the way there, and when I got to looking around the people all looked strange. They were all flat looking, like they were made out of cardboard or something. There was one guy there, a salesman, a big fat guy with red hair and freckles on the backs of his hands. He was laughing at Allen's story, his mouth wide open and his big stomach shaking. I felt like I could go over and put my fist through that stomach, and he'd keep right on laughing. It

scared me, because I didn't know what was happening.

"Then later, I was in the kitchen. I guess it was quite a bit later. I was fixing myself a drink, and the clock on the wall showed midnight. I was trying to figure out what had happened in the last couple of hours, when Allen came in. Right away I thought of what Susan had said, and I knew she'd be hell to live with if I didn't say something to him. I sure didn't feel much like it, though. Just the same, I asked him if he didn't think maybe it was time I got a little more money, since I'd been managing the lot for over a year.

"He looked at me a while, then he said, 'Evans, I've been meaning to talk to you. You know the lot hasn't been going too well lately. I've been thinking it might be a good idea to put someone else out there with you, kind of help put some life in things. Someone to keep an eye on the whole operation while you do a little more selling. That's what you're really good at, unloading those heaps.'

"That really tore it. If it hadn't been for the bourbon I wouldn't have said anything, I guess, but I let him have it. I told him to take his car lot and shove it.

"He stood there and stared at me for a minute, then he walked out. I gulped down the drink I was holding and poured myself another, straight. I was still standing there when Susan came in. Allen must have told her what I'd said, because she just looked at me, too. Didn't say anything, just stared at me with this funny expression on her face, like she wanted to spit

at me, or something. Then she turned and walked out, like Allen did. She didn't say a word to me."

Lying in the hospital bed in the darkened ward, Evans muttered, "Long time ago. It's all over. Forget it." But his mind continued to work, like a tape recorder playing back an old, worn reel. "Nobody would talk to me. Nobody said anything and everybody was made out of cardboard!"

Evans jumped as the newcomer began to moan again, louder this time. Suddenly there was a shout. "Help, falling! Jesus, I'm falling!"

Evans got out of bed and moved shakily to the young man's side, saying, "It's OK, buddy, it's OK now. Come on, wake up." As he put his hand on the newcomer's shoulder again, his mind kept repeating, "She wouldn't talk to me. Nobody says anything. I want someone to talk to me!"

The leather straps began to creak, and the voice from the bed rose to a scream. "For Christ sake, somebody, help!"

"Nobody will talk to me. Nobody has anything to say!" Evans was shaking the young man's shoulder harder and harder, trying desperately to bring him out of his dream. Then he heard quick footsteps coming down the hall, and he hurried back to his own bed. The other patients had begun to mutter in protest, but they were silenced by the opening of the ward door. Light spilled in from the hall, and through half-closed eyes Evans could see the shadowy figure of an interne step into the room. The interne moved the beam of a flashlight from bed to bed,

temporarily lighting up the features of the patients. Evans closed his eyes completely and turned his head toward the window as he heard the interne cross the room to the bed where the newcomer lay moaning. "A hypo," he thought. "That'll put him back under for a while."

The door closed softly, and Evans wiped his sweating palms on the sheets, the remembered taste of bourbon sharp in his throat. He opened his eyes and saw that dawn was coming, paling the glow of the street light. He looked toward the newcomer's bed and saw the young man's limp form, arms held helpless at his sides by the straps. In the dimness Evans could just make out the sheen of sweat on the pale, drawn face.

In the silence of the ward, Evans whispered, "I'm voluntary," then he turned and buried his face in the pillow to shut out the growing light.

A LONG TIME UNTIL MORNING AND OTHERS:
A CREATIVE REPORT

by

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THE ABSTRACT

A Long Time until Morning and Others is a collection of four short stories dealing with the problem of human isolation through the character of Charlie Evans, a man who finds that there is a barrier between himself and the people around him. As he becomes increasingly aware of the existence of this barrier, Charlie drinks more and more heavily, and in the title story, which ends the collection, he is in an alcoholic ward for the third time.

The movement toward the alcoholic ward has already begun in the first story, "The Garden," in which Charlie has to have a drink before he can face his father, who bothers Charlie because he is a walking dead man. The only things the elder Evans has left to do in life are to tend his suburban lawn and listen to his wife nag. Charlie tries to bring his father back to life, but he is not successful, and he is worried because he sees in the old man a possible ending for himself.

The second story, "The Wall," indicates that Charlie's realization of his inability to communicate has been brought about by a Korean war experience. The story shows him getting drunk and reliving this experience, along with other examples of his isolation. He tries to use sex to blot out the knowledge of his condition, but he finds that he cannot even communicate sexually. Charlie's attempt to use another person, the girl, in "The Wall" leads into the situation of the third story. Here he is trying to develop a cynical attitude toward others in order to

be a success in the used car business. He finds, however, that he is unable to use his isolation to his own advantage, that he is incapable of complete selfishness.

In renouncing the cynicism of the car business Charlie has made a positive step, but he still cannot communicate, and he still drinks to forget his isolation. This drinking leads logically to the alcoholic ward of the title story. Here Charlie has the same problems, but he has realized that he is not the only one with these problems, and in his attempt to help another patient he indicates a loss of self-centeredness.

